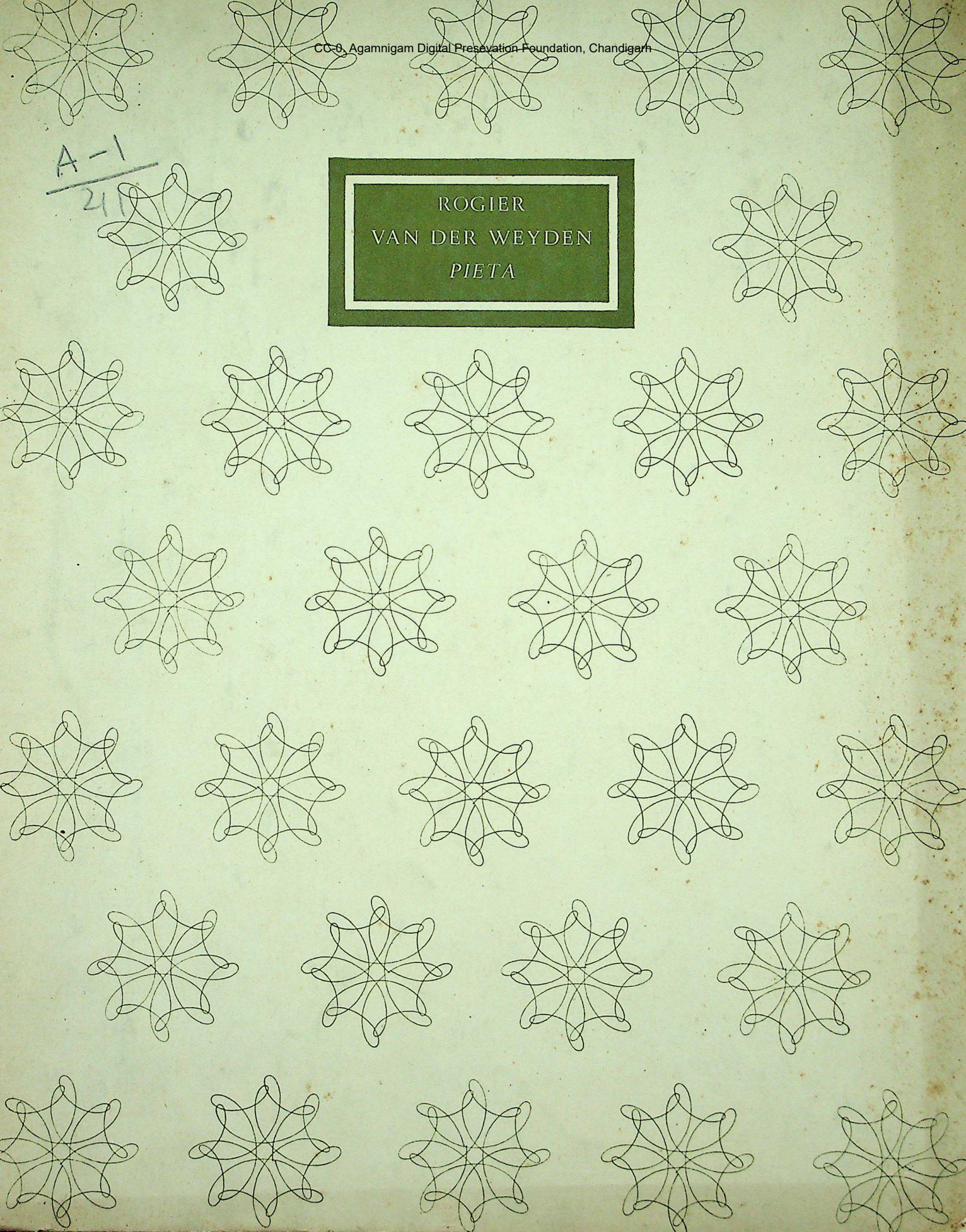


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ROGIER
VAN DER WEYDEN
PIETA



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FORM AND COLOUR

ROGIER VAN DER WEYDEN: PIETA



ROGIER VAN DER WEYDEN: *Pietà*

PLATE I

From left to right: Mary Magdalene, Weeping Woman, Mary of Bethany, Nicodemus, Christ, St. John the Evangelist, Mary, Joseph of Arimathea, Bishop, St. Peter, St. Paul.

Royal Museum (Mauritshuis) The Hague

ROGIER VAN DER WEYDEN
PIETA

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ROGIER VAN DER WEYDEN'S PIETA

In its fullest sense the fifteenth century belongs to the people of Flanders who, by their material wealth, their political progress, their powerful and effective rulers, became one of the most envied and influential peoples of Europe. It belongs to them, too, because of their art. Flemish painters produced their greatest work during the fifteenth century—work which combined the material and the spiritual feelings of the time and the place. In the galaxy of Flemish artists everyone has his place and his particular claim to fame. The natural ability, the originality of Jan and Hubert van Eyck brought Flemish art to its most perfect form. The concrete subject, idealized to symbolize a lofty spiritual feeling, was Van der Weyden's special talent. Hans Memlinc added a sympathy with the trees, the rivers, the fields of Flanders.

These men are the last and the greatest of the Flemish medieval artists. For them religion was the dominant theme. They felt and expressed it in terms of medieval society, but more specifically in terms of the 'good' life of Flanders. Van der Weyden, especially, succeeded in capturing this synthesis of material well-being and strong spiritual feeling. Even more articulate than the other great Flemish artists, he explained how his people felt in images familiar to them.

ROGIER VAN DER WEYDEN was born in Tournai in 1399. As with Jan van Eyck, we know little about his early life. We know that, unlike Van Eyck who was a court painter and worked for a small and admiring circle, Van der Weyden painted for a much larger audience. Since he was commissioned by clerical boards and town councils, he produced more than Van Eyck and his paintings found their way into churches and chapels, town halls and other public buildings. He appealed greatly to the public and, probably quite consciously, he made an effort to reach the great mass of his contemporaries.

The people he reached were, for the most part, illiterate. They were rather pictorially minded, and receptive to an art which reflected their own lives spiritually and materially. They were a pious people and enjoyed seeing themselves in the portrayal of the life of the Holy Family. They expected their artists to transplant the scene of the Passion to the Flanders of the fifteenth century. Their fascination with colour was childlike. To them colour expressed the beauty they wanted. It added a nobility to the religious scenes they felt so intimately and so compassionately. Van der Weyden was concerned with the needs of his people. The artist respected these simple spirits, admitted their sense of visual imagery. They in turn accepted and admired his art.



Though we know so little about Van der Weyden's beginnings and his initial efforts, we know that his teacher was the painter Robert Campin of Tournai and that he served an apprenticeship there for five years, ending in 1432. Works ascribed to Campin show us that he may be considered a more realistically minded forerunner of Van der Weyden. He must have had a great influence on Van der Weyden's style, so great, in fact, that some critics attribute Campin's works to his pupil. Without going into this controversy, it is safe to say that the works of the two men show greater differences than can be explained simply by the contrast between youth and maturity. Van der Weyden's work shows us a personality, a character far different from that of Campin.

Rogier remained in Campin's workshop for some time after he attained his mastership, but eventually moved to Brussels where he married Elisabeth Goffaerts, who was related to the Campin family through her mother. In 1435 he became the town painter (*portraiteurder*) of the city of Brussels and held that position until his death in 1464.

His stay in Brussels was interrupted in 1450 when he travelled to Italy and spent two months visiting Ferrara, Florence, Milan, and Rome where the papal jubilee was being celebrated. Although the trip influenced his art somewhat and new impressions appear in some later works, it had no telling effect on his style which was already fully developed before he left home. Many of the Italian aristocrats he met on his trip became his lifelong friends and patrons. Among them were the Este family and the Sforzas in Milan. He was doing well and very soon he became well known abroad. But no commissions could interfere with the lively and human work of the 'imagiers' of Tournai, and Rogier had been one of them. With the Van Eycks and Memlinc, his is the supreme expression of that art of the Middle Ages made up of tradition, kindness, tears and love. After them came new ideas and new techniques from Italy, from the Renaissance, from the Reformation.

Rogier van der Weyden was very much of his times. He was a man of stature in his city. The council of Brussels chose him to create the extensive murals for the court room in the city hall. He was on excellent terms with such important contemporaries as Jean Chevrot, the abbot of St. Omer, and Nicholaas Rollin, Philip the Good's chancellor, for whom he designed the *Last Judgment* which is still in Beaune at the *Hôpital Rollin*.

Like the other able and successful painters of his time, Rogier had a workshop where various commissions were executed under his supervision. He polychromed bronze statues, that is, he coloured them partially or entirely; he did small paintings; he was responsible for large panels. In order to accomplish all this, he had a staff of assistants. The work was not done entirely by the master himself.

Much is obscure about the life of Rogier van der Weyden, or Rogier de la Pasture as he was called in French. (He came from that part of Flanders where French is spoken now and we are given to believe that he, living in court circles, used it rather than Flemish.) But this is subject matter for historians. We must depend on his work alone for a full appreciation of his thoughts, his judgment and his concept of life.

Thanks to the zeal and the competence of such art critics as M. Friedländer, G. Hulin de Loo and Jos. Destree, we are able to arrange Rogier's vast output in chronological sequence. We get a comprehensive picture of his artistic development until, during his later years, he becomes a static force. There is no slackening, no decline, but rather a finer and sounder execution

within a set formula. In this later period he becomes one of the noblest and purest artists which any epoch has produced. His taste, though its aberrations were frequent, remains always delicate, elevated, sincere.

Van der Weyden's art is pre-eminently religious, even in his portraits. In a supplementary wing he portrays the patron adoring the Virgin and Child, or whatever holy subject he chose for the main panel. These commissioned portraits are as religious in concept as his other paintings of the great episodes of the Gospel which he pictures so heart-rendingly, or so majestically, when it is opportune. His main theme was Christ, from birth to death on the cross, and the Day of Judgment.

Among the paintings that left his workshop in the later period, between 1455 and 1460, is the panel of the *PIETÀ*, now one of the treasures of the *Mauritshuis* in The Hague.

As we look at the *Pietà* [PLATE 1] we realize again that Rogier van der Weyden's paintings are the most idealized and abstract of the Flemish masters. In the multiplicity of details we are reminded that this artist came from Tournai, the home of the stonemasons, sculptors, tapestry weavers. He shares the sculptor's feeling for the essentially abstract idea of space. In the following plates we can study, without recourse to the original picture or to the magnifying glass, the peculiarities of the master's style—his 'handwriting'. We shall discover not only *what* is represented, but rather *how*, by what means, the artist has succeeded in presenting his theme.

The picture compels us to look first at Christ [PLATE 2]. Van der Weyden's innate sense of drama places Christ's body on a large strip of linen that sweeps through the centre of the painting. The head leans to one side and the hair is arranged sculpturally. The mouth is slightly open as if in a last gasp. The eyes are sunk in their sockets. It is a well-formed face, hardly distorted by death and suffering. Only a few bloody traces of the crown of thorns remain. Rogier is not a painter of the hideous. Studied exaggeration, such as the Spaniard Morales or the Dutch Jan Mostaert sought, is unknown to him.

The lean thorax, the sunken diaphragm and the limp lower part of the body have been modelled to give dramatic effect. It is not an absolutely natural anatomy which Van der Weyden presents: the body is too slight in proportion to the head, the arms too slender, the entire figure too elongated. But this is precisely what strengthens our compassion for this figure of Christ. The colour of the skin, shaded in death, stands out against the clear white of the sheet and contrasts with the warmth of life surrounding the body. The sheet on which he lies shows not only the formal drapery of a shroud but also, with naïve realism, the creases it would naturally acquire as it lay in the linen chest. Everywhere along the hem the sheet is unmistakably thin in texture.

In this detail of the picture, at the upper right, we see only part of the heavy dark blue gown of the Holy Virgin and her tenderly folded hands. Here is not a fixed gesture—slight movement seems to be indicated in the left little finger.

Everything around Christ's body is faithfully portrayed to the smallest detail, even to the shape of St. John's toes. But these toes may have become a little too independent in the artist's imagination. The big toe seems to be on the wrong side, and the position of the leg is not clear enough. This is typical of Rogier's manner of working. He works from imagination; the models are only secondary.





PLATE 3 gives us a very excellent idea of the silent emotion of the woman who is half kneeling, half sitting on the left side of the picture. Slight and slender, her head a little too big on the long throat, she is the ideal beauty of an age that gives first consideration to spiritual qualities. She is dressed in a pale blue cloak with long ornamental sleeves. Her turban-like headdress indicates an oriental setting. It is wound around a coif entwined with gold thread which draws the hair back on both sides. The sleeves of the bodice which she wears under the loose, wide outer garment are of a thicker crimson material with a sheen that suggests long velvet pile. The same material appears in the pointed triangle at the throat.

Though we know from innumerable pictures of similar subjects that the fifteenth-century painters of the Low Countries dressed their Biblical characters in the contemporary costume of their own surroundings, yet we are aware that these are not everyday clothes. In fact, the usual cloak has been used but the way of wearing it has been slightly rearranged for this special occasion, as was frequently the custom in the mystery plays of the day. The action and language in the features, however, are universally applicable. We understand and recognize the restrained grief, the instinctive desire to turn away from the sorrowful sight of the beloved dead. We understand, too, how she touches, carefully and respectfully, the cold, numb arm. Her other hand has been laid on her own breast in sudden oppression. The delicately moulded hands suggest that she is nobly born. This woman does not weep, and yet there is no resignation either. Her youthful face, anxious and uncertain, suggests that she has not yet fully realized the impact of this tragedy.

We see, to the right, part of the split tunic of Nicodemus, his precious belt made of small links, and a piece of the brocade of the undergarment. It is one of the fashionable Italian brocades with the pomegranate pattern, for Nicodemus was a well-to-do man.

And on the left side, beneath the woman's elbow, something appears of Mary Magdalene's wide, dark purple-brown upper garment. The edgings here, as well as those at the throat, and at the brocaded ends of the sleeves, are set with a double row of pearls between which red and blue round cut gems alternate with single pearls and pearl rosettes.

If we could compare this detail with a reproduction of equal quality showing similar parts of paintings by Jan van Eyck or by Geertgen tot St. Jans (who worked almost a quarter of a century later in the northern part of the Low Countries), we should be able to realize what Rogier's weaker points were. At first glance we would see that he paints these material things accurately and conscientiously. He knows the quality of the various textures, but he does not paint them in their mutual relation, he does not convey to us the *feel* of the materials as convincingly as those other artists. Rogier has something else to convey.

His aim is clear in the detail on the JACKET of this book. This Mary Magdalene with her pyxis, who dries her eyes with her red cloak and looks on in dumb misery, is the most characteristic figure of Rogier's conception. A slender young woman with a wistful, serious face, long neck and fair complexion, whose worldly costume and hairdress suit her part, she is a masterpiece of Rogier's which he must have painted with all the concentration and power he could muster. Her face, with the regular firm features of an aristocrat, is that of a thinking

human being. She has Van der Weyden's characteristic, beautifully curved eyelids. They emphasize the nobility of the face and Rogier's particular style is quite in place here. The high forehead, presumably depilated at the upper part, is clearly defined by a small piece of velvet held by two red strings. She is the typically fashionable woman of that time. The coiffure shows a great mass of thick very long auburn hair, first brushed back from the forehead, then doubled up and wound about with two plaited ends.

What such a fashionable hairstyle could mean for the profile it frames, is clear. It acts as a counterweight for the curve of the neck and seems to pull the head a little up and backwards. In the Low Countries this kind of coiffure remained for a long time exceptional for daily wear. In Italy we find it earlier in the fifteenth century. The artist may have added this foreign touch to indicate something worldly and distinguished.

No costume of the age would better suit Rogier's particular style. For here the *contour* reigns supreme. The dressed head is as if cut out of an Italian medal. The magnificent outline of the red cloak undulates from the clasp at the shoulder downward and upward again to the forearm. The sculptural lines are accentuated by the colouring which, with Van der Weyden, is always harmonious, matched, composed in unity like a fine tapestry or a beautiful stained-glass window. The texture in itself—the contrast of metal and textiles, of hair and fur—is secondary. Rogier does not neglect it altogether but he is more easily satisfied than Van Eyck. This is understandable when we consider that Van der Weyden only occasionally emphasizes the contrast between shadow and light. Only by painting a 'half-darkness', against full light and deep shadow, does a painter represent each substance in its surroundings so realistically that we seem forced to finger the painted object. The Van Eyck brothers and Geertgen did this; Dirk Bouts sometimes too. They make us feel at once the silken touch of the velvet, the dry coolness of the linen. Rogier generally expresses the difference in textures merely by varying the thickness of the hem. Rather than emphasize the form, the colour, the sheen of materials, he devoted his concern to the spiritual feeling in his subject.

In this he shows himself to be an absolute master, as is shown by the figure of St. John the Evangelist, standing behind the Virgin Mary [PLATE 4]. His attitude is somewhat stiff as he bends to one side, complementing the position of the Virgin. He gathers the folds of his red cloak under his forearm in a gesture typical of the fashion of the day. Here again, the body seems somewhat slender for the massiveness of the head; the hands are too small. But this is a purposeful distortion. The effect produced is evocative; it is that of an ascetic person, deeply moved, standing behind the woman whose grief he wants to relieve. The abundant locks frame the face and emphasize its agonized expression; the closed lips seem to tremble with piteous sorrow; the eyes look down in compassion; the hands—the right one is almost feminine in its delicate slenderness—touch Mary's shoulder. The face of Mary awakens in our hearts the feeling of serene resignation; her grief, more profound, is pure and devout, and it seems to be almost beyond the realm of human understanding.

These two figures show the greatest contrast in the picture. The surroundings reflect this contrast: sorrow in the foreground; peace and enchantment in the background. The dark



wooden cross is coldly set off against the bright idyllic landscape; swans are drifting on the pond in front of the castle; a country road bordered by trees winds its way around it; in the distance the landscape melts away in vaguely indicated terraces; small fluffy clouds float high above.

In the group to the left, with the grieving Mary of Bethany, we see the gray head of Nicodemus [PLATE 5]. He is a sturdy old man whose wrinkles and lines indicate his age. His face is earnest, anxious and full of compassion. For the moment all care is directed to his solemn task. In deepest humility he supports the Saviour's body as the Mother looks upon it. Nicodemus is the one active person in a picture of sorrowful contemplation. Only the woman behind Nicodemus has something of the impetuosity with which Rogier expressed himself in his earlier period. She bends the upper part of her body forward as if to see over Nicodemus' shoulder. Like John, she gathers the folds of her cloak under her forearm, pressing them to the body with her elbow. But again the gesture is so slight that we would not recognize it except that it is so often repeated in both the painting and the sculpture of the period. The painter clearly intends to have her raise both her arms and yet hold her skirt. In spite of the difficulties this entails, the intentions of the artist are perfectly evident. Behind the woman we see the grey gate and the wall towers of the town in the distance.

Van der Weyden's pupil, Hans Memlinc, probably was working with him at the time this picture was painted. In fact some of the details of Mary of Bethany differ from the usual style of Rogier. The curious shade of brown of her fur-lined mantle occurs frequently in Memlinc's work but is not found elsewhere in that of Van der Weyden.

We realize now the sharp break in the picture. There are two distinct groups. Those surrounding Christ's head are actively lamenting. Thus this group, composed of Mary Magdalene, the weeping woman, Mary of Bethany, Nicodemus, John and the Virgin Mary seem to be mourning more openly than the group centered around Christ's feet.

In that group we see Joseph of Arimathea, holding one end of the sheet on which Christ lies [PLATE 1]. This line, from Nicodemus through the figure of Christ to Joseph, is the connecting link between the two groups. Joseph is more plainly dressed than Nicodemus. He is sunk in quiet contemplation after the sad and heavy task of lowering Christ's body.

To the right of Joseph, a space has been left open for the donor. Here our attention is first drawn to the kneeling bishop because both his costume and his bland expression set him apart from the others [PLATE 6]. It was originally thought that this altar piece, like the triptych in Berlin, was commissioned by a certain Bladelin, but a later examination revealed the kneeling bishop to be none other than the bishop of St. Omer, Jean Chevrot, a high dignitary at the court of Duke Philip the Good and one of Van der Weyden's most influential patrons. He is not included in the action itself any more than the two apostles, St. Peter and St. Paul, who accompany him and apparently introduce him as their particular ward. We may recognize the apostles by their symbols, the key and the sword.

It is interesting that Rogier should have portrayed Saint Paul who, according to all accounts, was not present at the time of the Deposition or Entombment. It was customary then to have

the artist include in his picture the donor's patron saint. St. Paul may have been the patron saint of Bishop Chevrot or of his parish; this may account for his presence in the painting.

The prelate wears his ornate robes. Nothing is lacking: the dark undergarment shows at the neck; the white linen vestment, the richly decorated cope, the richly jewelled mitre, the metal crosier, even the maniple (the narrow band worn over the right wrist) are evidence of his position as a high church dignitary. His hands are folded in prayer and he wears rings over his gloves. The red brocade of the wide cope apparently intrigued the artist who in this case, of course, painted from a model. He has worked the pattern of the ornament in different shades, even in the folds. Van der Weyden rarely does this, but here he follows the method of Jan van Eyck; even here the deepest grooves in the fold still remain dark lines, rather than 'deep furrows where shadows reign' as Friedländer so tellingly described such work by Van Eyck.

The greatest pains were apparently taken in painting the large orphreys, those heavy strips sewn on the brocade to represent saints under small canopies. It is the well-known ornamentation of pontifical dress, executed in the technique of embroidery which might be called 'enamel stitch' and which was found especially in the Low Countries during the first quarter of the fifteenth century. Here at regular intervals the fine glow of parallel gold thread shows through coloured silk thread laid on top. It is really painting with the embroidery needle.

The luxurious effect had already enchanted Van Eyck when he similarly ornamented his angels on the Ghent altarpiece. Van Eyck was Rogier's master in this technique which requires a perfect understanding of light and shade. Nevertheless, Van der Weyden obtains the necessary effect and does so harmoniously. He has equal success with the big silver-gilt morse or clasp at the breast and with the staff on top of the elegant Gothic crosier.

The figures of Peter and Paul [PLATE 7] at the extreme right are essential to keep the balance of the whole composition. Paul's red cloak is placed in juxtaposition to that of Mary Magdalene. Both the apostles are contemplating the drama of the Passion. Peter does it in mournful resignation and Paul remains grim in his grief. Behind them a placid landscape contrasts with the commotion in the foreground. This background is a more familiar one than that which lies behind the central group. It is almost as if the artist involuntarily becomes closer to his own world in the presence of his patron. The earthy quality of the pigeon house, as compared with the castle on the left, is evidence of this. As a mere echo of his journey to Italy, we see the snow-capped Alps in the distance. The Alps never impressed Van der Weyden as strongly as they did Van Eyck who used them as background for so much of his work.

As we look again at the picture and its details, we feel that Van der Weyden knew and enjoyed the material luxury that was part of his time. He was as much aware as Van Eyck of rich colours, gleaming jewels, fine materials. But for his purpose, these were neither necessary nor always desirable. Instead he depended on the fine lines of the tapestry weaver, the three-dimensional quality of the sculptor and his own dramatic composition.

The picture in the *Mauritshuis* was meant as an altarpiece, as was the greater part of his work. The subject belongs to



a cycle very often treated by Rogier: Crucifixion, Lamentation and Entombment. The Hague piece is not so much a Deposition as a Lamentation; it is certainly not an Entombment. The large world-famous picture in the *Escorial* of Madrid, on the contrary, gives us a different episode in the Passion. There the body of Christ is just being lowered slowly between the deeply grieving bystanders.

Others, mostly small pictures, show the dead Son lying in his Mother's lap, and usually have fewer figures. The moment of the Entombment, when the holy body is put in a rocky sepulchre, is shown in the collection of the *Uffizi* in Florence. In it, however, the artist depicts the moment shortly after the Descent from the Cross. Nicodemus supports the inanimate body under the armpits so that the two stiffened arms are slightly outstretched. The Holy Virgin kneels at the foot of the cross. Mary Magdalene stands silently weeping at the extreme left behind the older woman. In the *Escorial* panel, on the other hand, she is at the feet of the Lord, wringing her hands convulsively, her figure a symbol of emotion. In the *Uffizi* panel there is a beginning of resignation, a tranquility new in Rogier van der Weyden's dramatic style.

Van der Weyden's art is always monumental. It is aloof rather than intimate, significant rather than pleasing. The great stage manager never loses himself in small things, no matter how much he may appreciate them. He knows exactly how to subordinate everything to a fixed rhythm. This is his greatness; none of his many followers has been able to approach him in this. It is the strength from which all his pupils have drawn. The most important among them, Hans Memlinc, was saved by it from sinking to the level of a charming, but rather average and sentimental, fashionable painter.

Van der Weyden's rhythm derived from his time and his surroundings as much as it did from the genius of the master himself. It was born of the people and reflected their wants, their critical standards, their love of drama, imagery and colour. The genius comes in the use of these materials to form an intricate yet unified art. Van der Weyden used his own ways to achieve the effect he sought. By idealizing an expression here, by placing a shimmering colour there, by distorting the shape of a head or a hand, he achieved what none of his contemporaries quite captured: a perfect union of spiritual and material life as it was lived in fifteenth-century Flanders.



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